



US009315353B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Stollery et al.

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 9,315,353 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Apr. 19, 2016**

(54) **STACKING OF GLOVES**

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(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 1035 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **13/503,062**

(22) PCT Filed: **Oct. 20, 2010**

(86) PCT No.: **PCT/GB2010/051768**

§ 371 (c)(1),
(2), (4) Date: **Apr. 20, 2012**

(87) PCT Pub. No.: **WO2011/048417**

PCT Pub. Date: **Apr. 28, 2011**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2012/0204517 A1 Aug. 16, 2012

(30) **Foreign Application Priority Data**

Oct. 20, 2009 (GB) 0918345.0
Apr. 13, 2010 (GB) 1006111.7

(51) **Int. Cl.**

A41H 33/00 (2006.01)
B65H 29/24 (2006.01)

(Continued)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **B65H 29/24** (2013.01); **B65B 35/50**
(2013.01); **B65B 35/58** (2013.01); **B65B 57/10**
(2013.01);

(Continued)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC B65H 29/24; B65H 29/32; B65B 35/50;
B65B 35/58; B65B 63/045; B65B 57/10

USPC 223/37, 38
See application file for complete search history.

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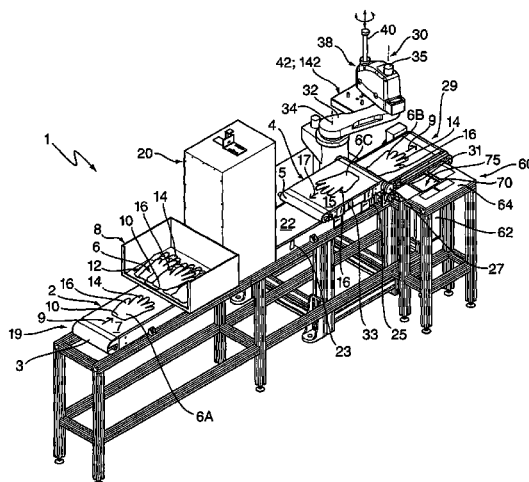
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Primary Examiner — Nathan Durham

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A glove stacking apparatus for preparing a stack of gloves prior to packing into a box, and a method of stacking gloves, particularly ambidextrous disposable hygienic gloves, preferably with the thumbs of each glove in a desired orientation with respect to each other are disclosed. A glove stacking apparatus for forming a stack of gloves comprises a packing recess for receiving the gloves to be stacked, and adjacent the recess at least one movable flap for folding towards the recess a portion of a glove overlapping said edge of the recess. The movable flap has a surface that is permeable to gaseous flow through the surface, and the glove stacking apparatus including a source of vacuum pressure and means to apply the vacuum air pressure through the permeable surface of the movable flap in order to pull the overlapping portion of the glove to the flap prior to folding of the overlapping portion. The source of vacuum pressure is separate from the flap so that as the flap folds towards the recess, the application of the vacuum air pressure through the permeable surface is automatically released.

13 Claims, 15 Drawing Sheets



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- (51) **Int. Cl.**
B65B 35/58 (2006.01)
B65B 63/04 (2006.01)
B65B 57/10 (2006.01)
B65B 35/50 (2006.01)
B65B 5/06 (2006.01)
B65B 25/20 (2006.01)
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- (52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B65B 63/045** (2013.01); **B65B 5/06**
(2013.01); **B65B 25/20** (2013.01); **B65H**
2301/332 (2013.01); **B65H 2301/4472**
(2013.01); **B65H 2301/44734** (2013.01); **B65H**
2406/12 (2013.01); **B65H 2406/351** (2013.01);
B65H 2511/216 (2013.01); **B65H 2555/31**
(2013.01)

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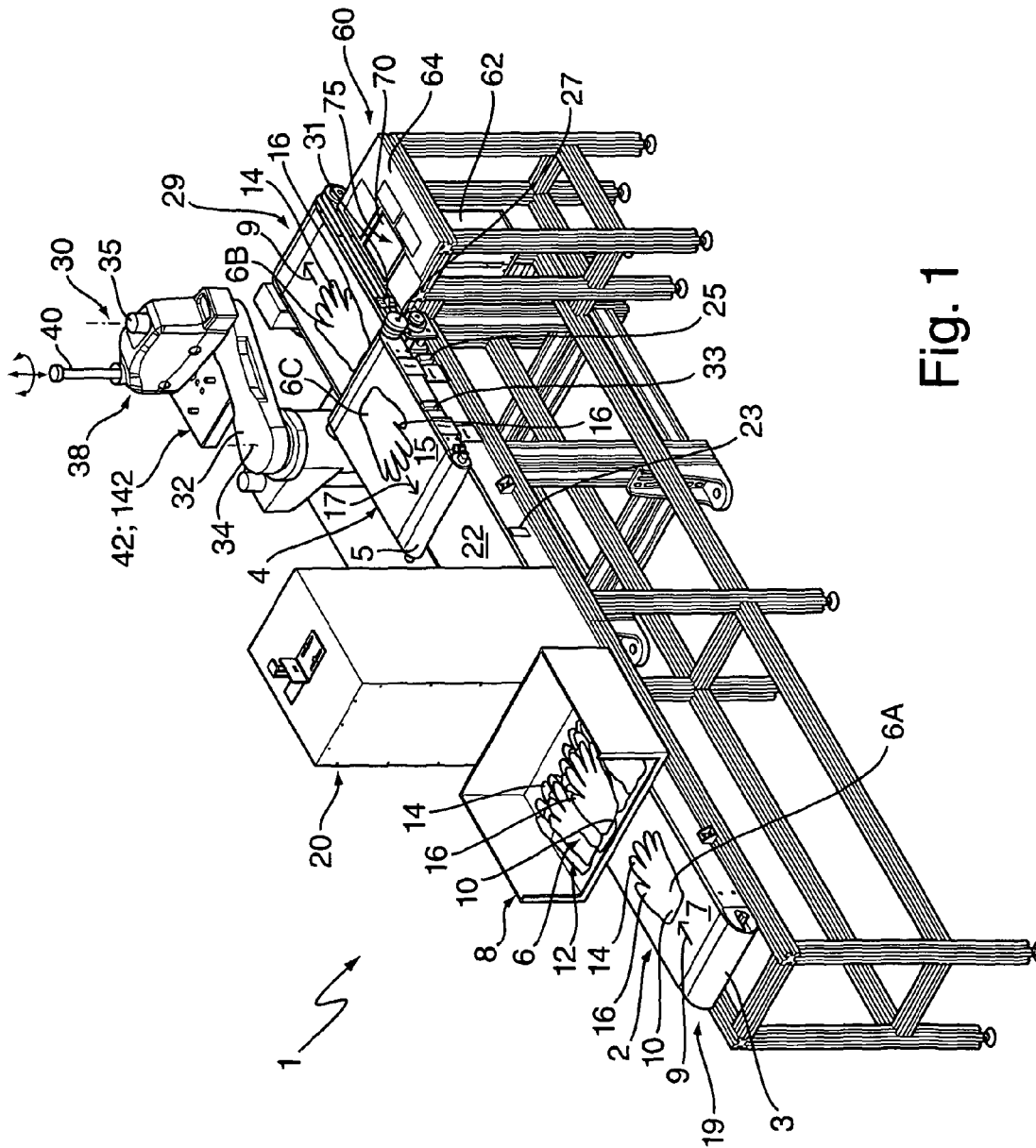


Fig. 1

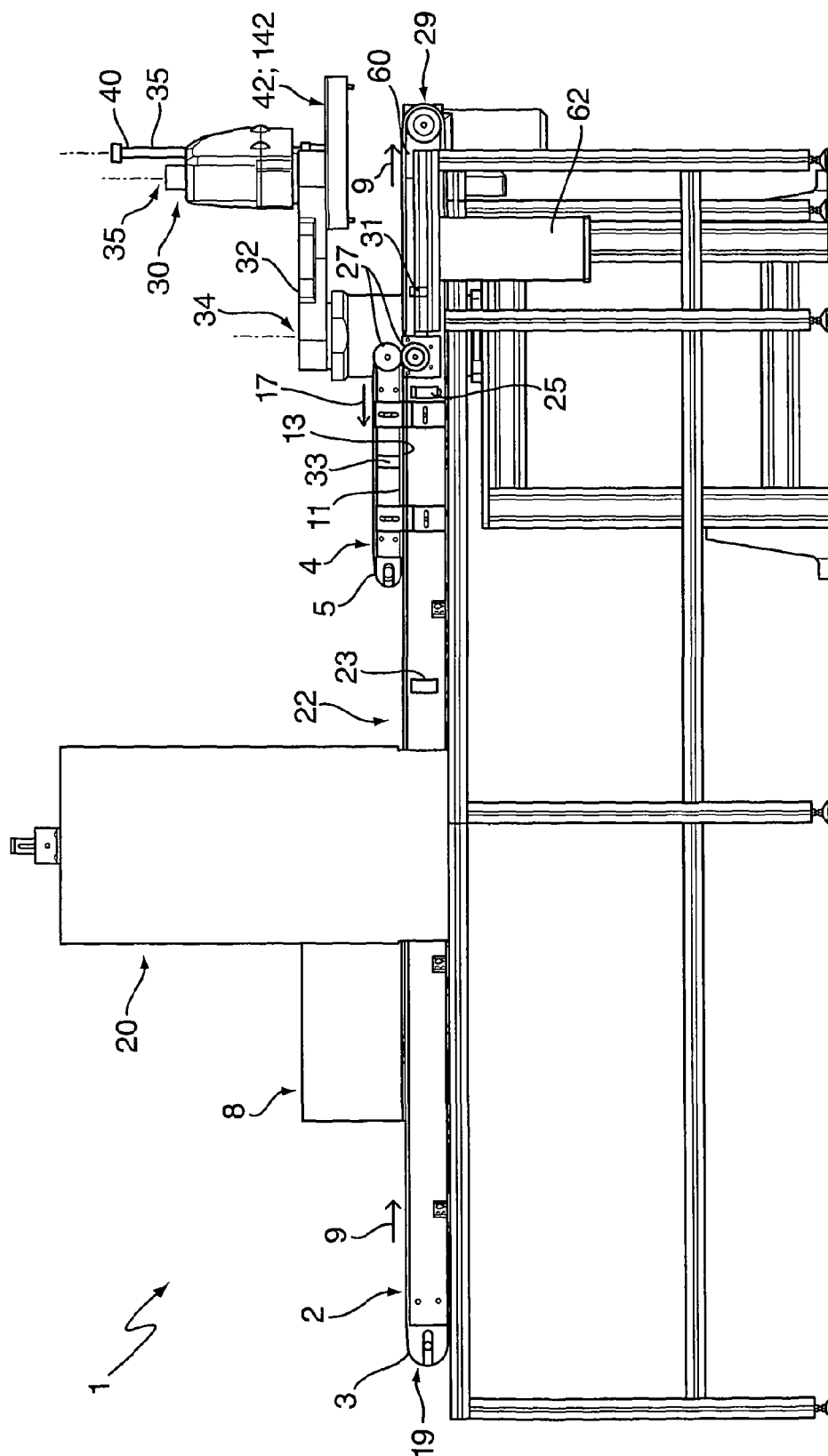


Fig. 2

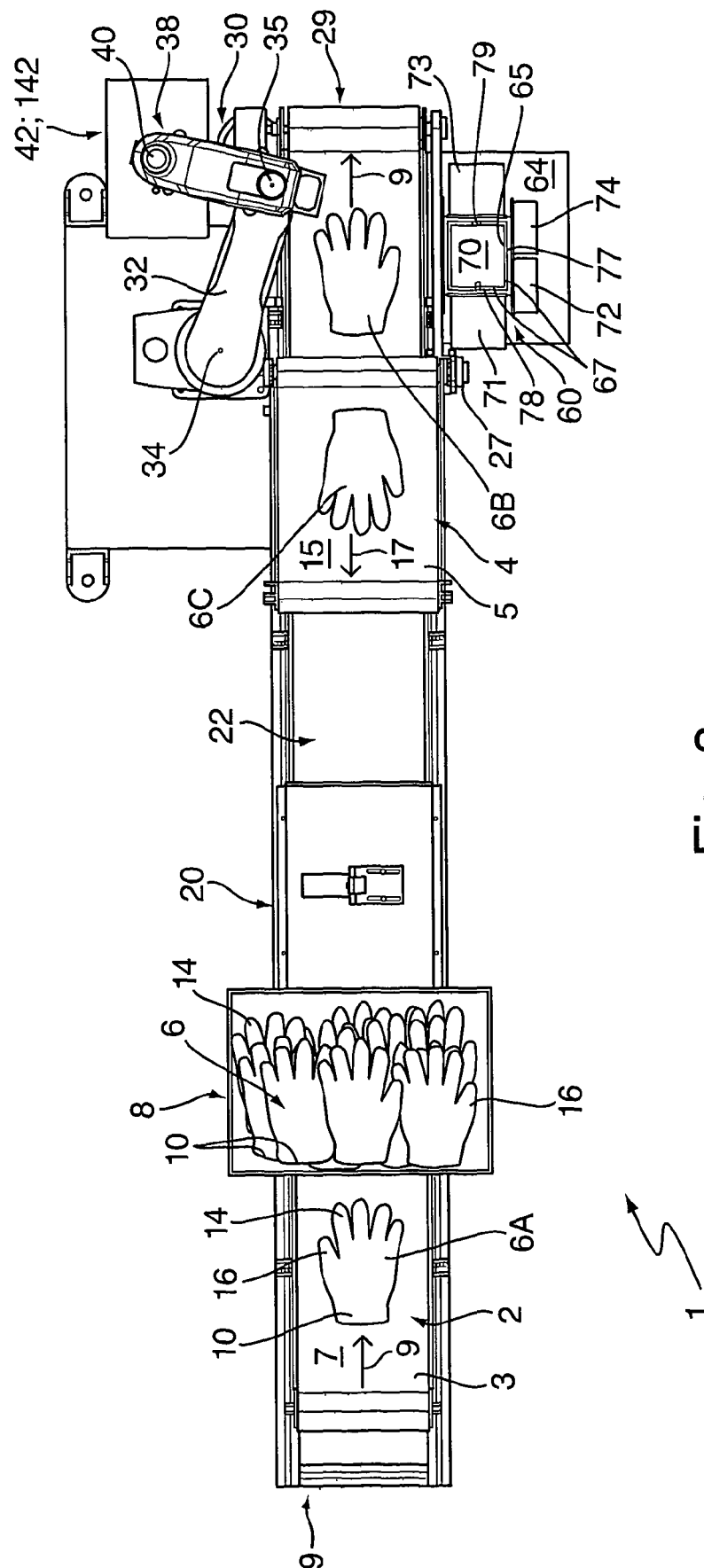


Fig. 3

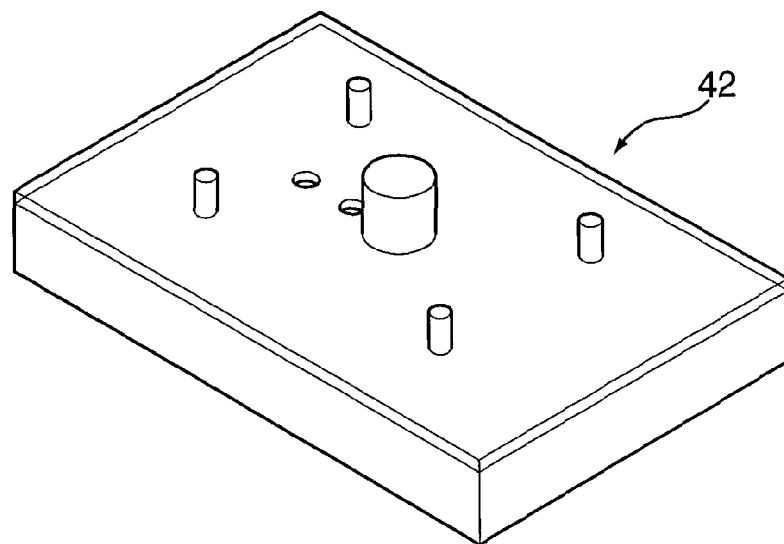


Fig. 4

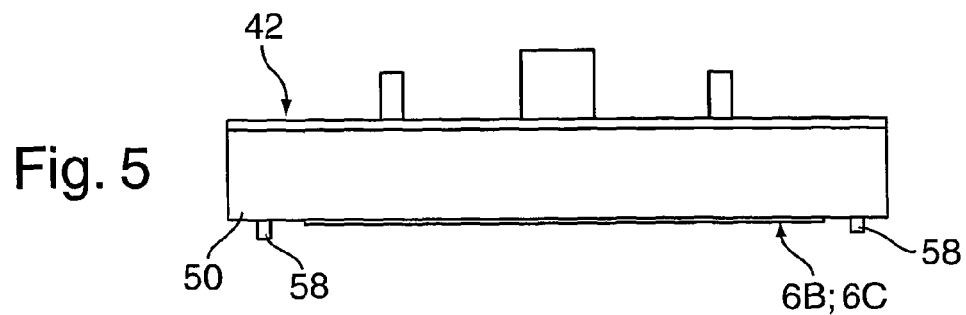


Fig. 5

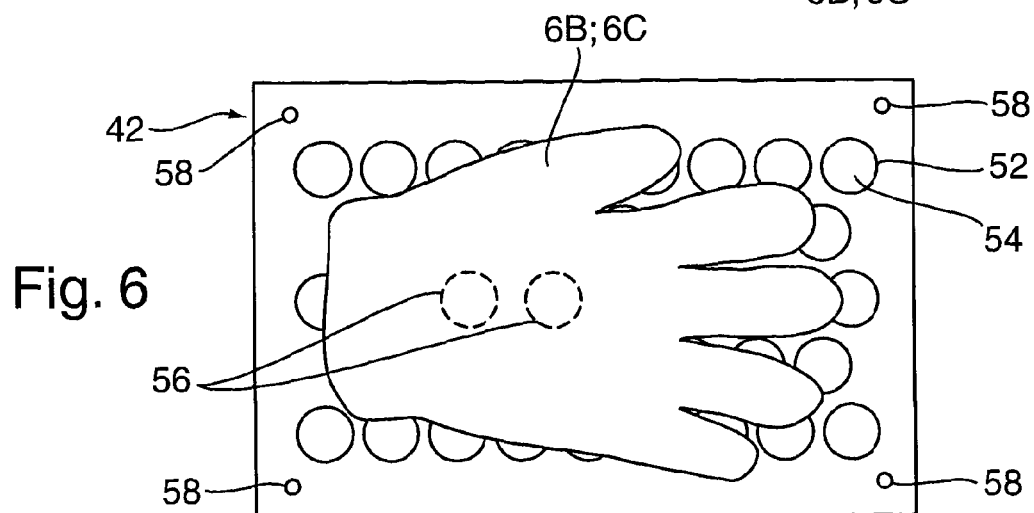


Fig. 6

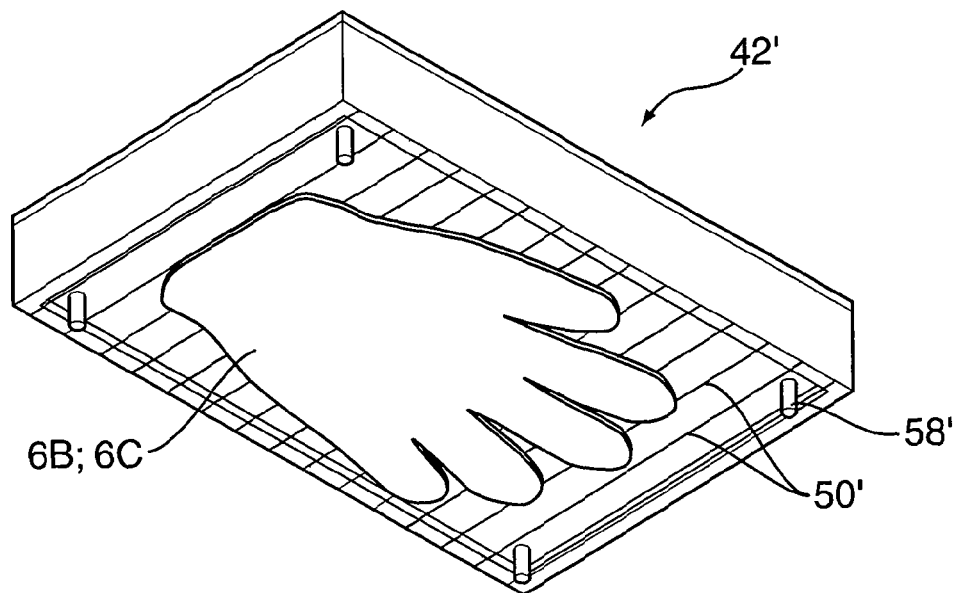


Fig. 7

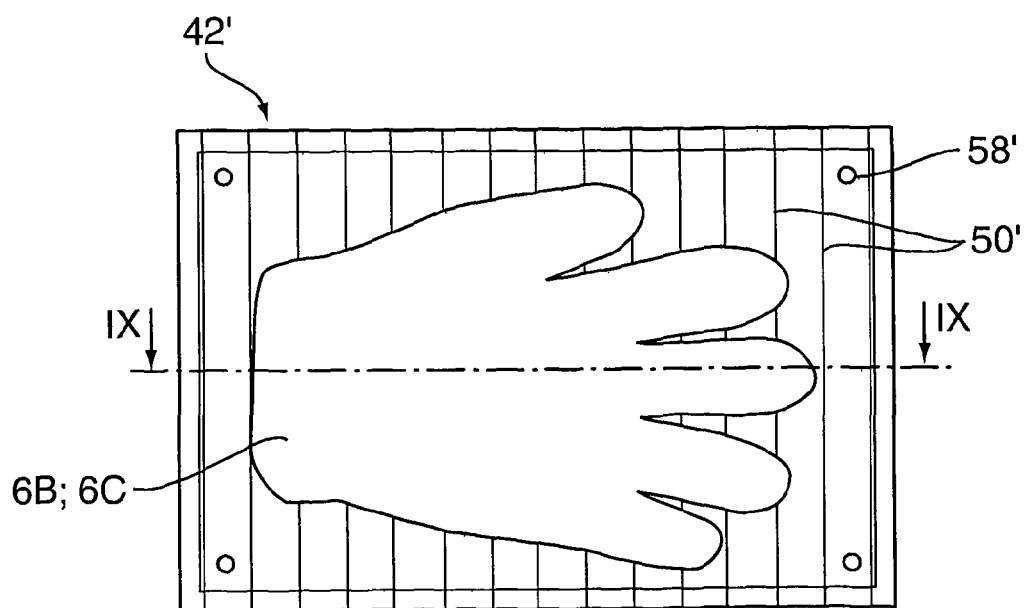


Fig. 8

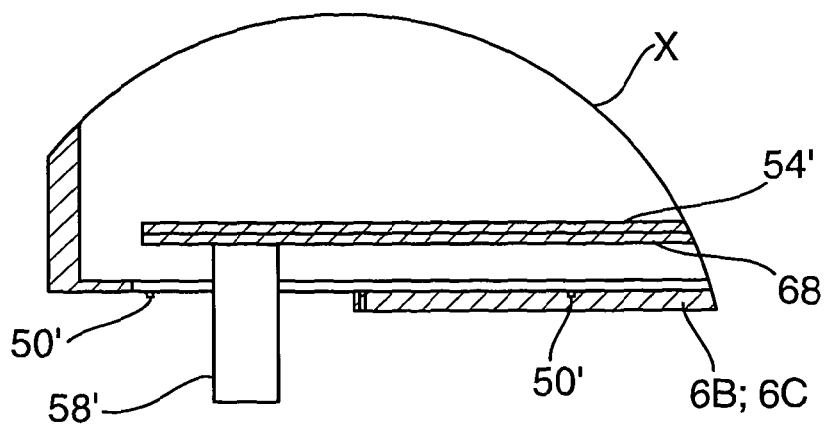
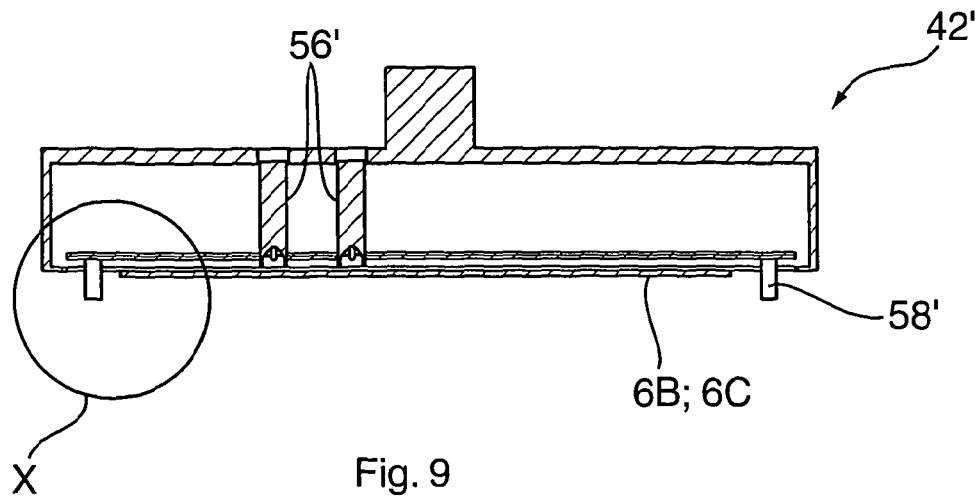


Fig. 10

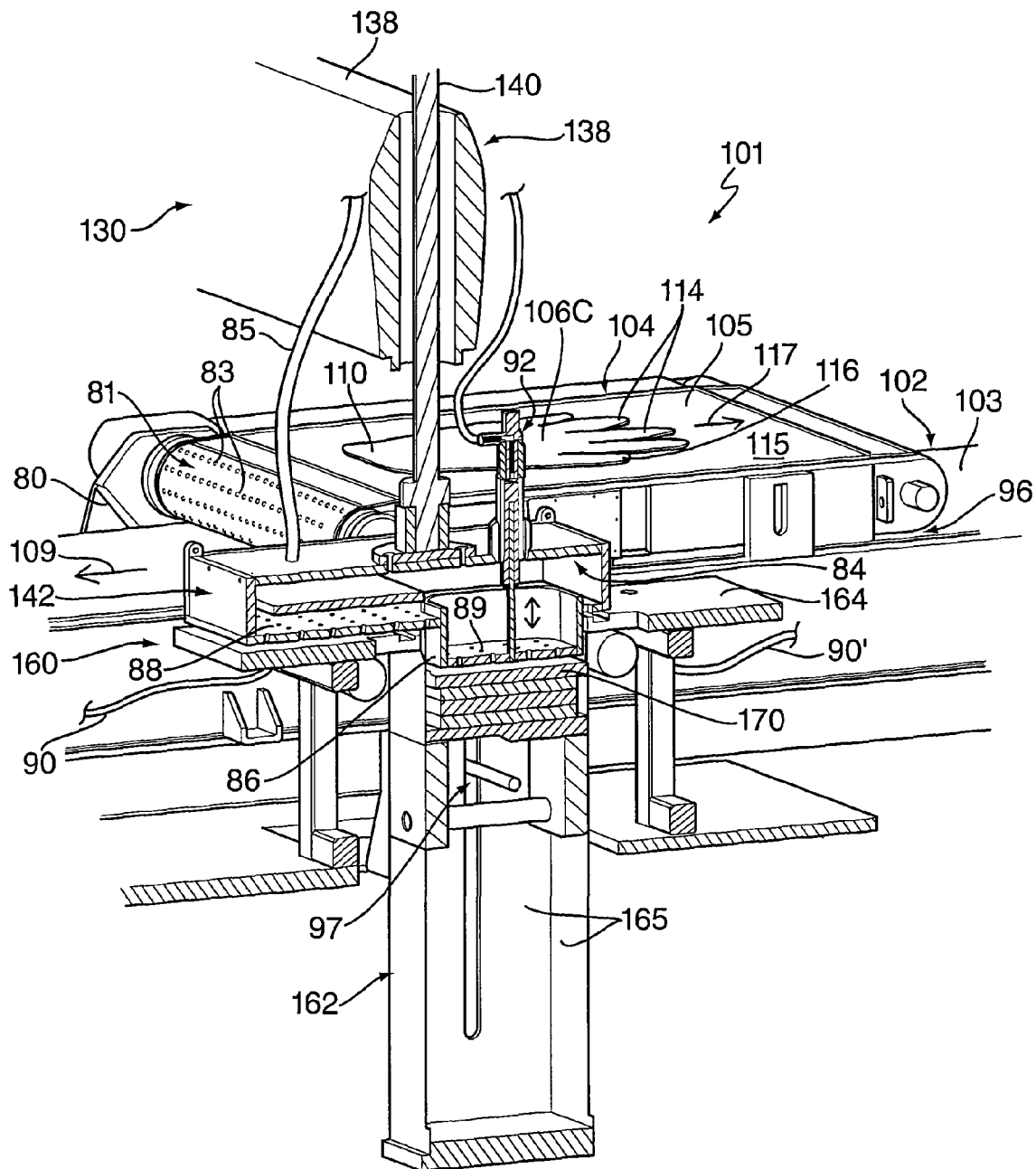


Fig. 11

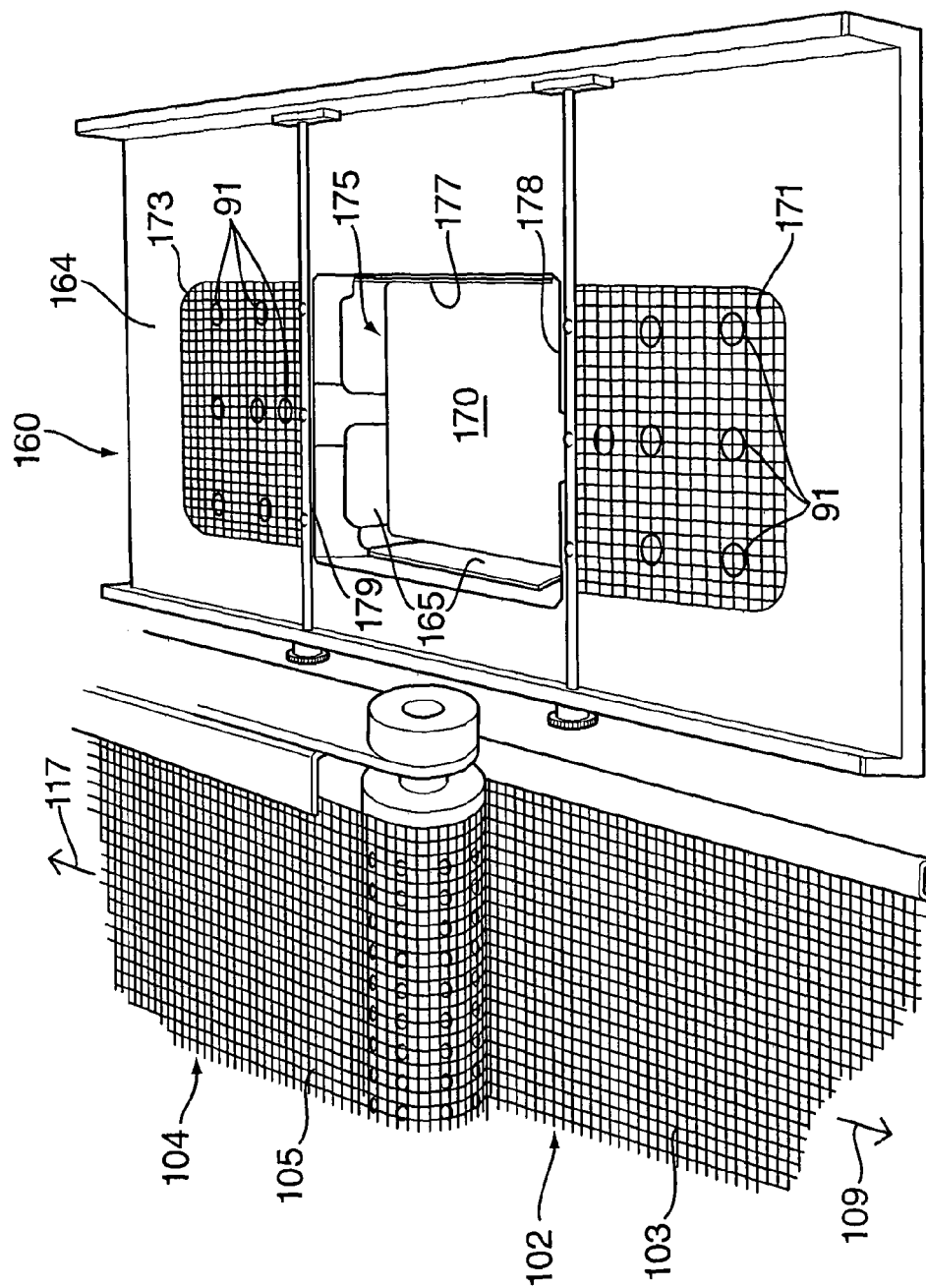


Fig. 12

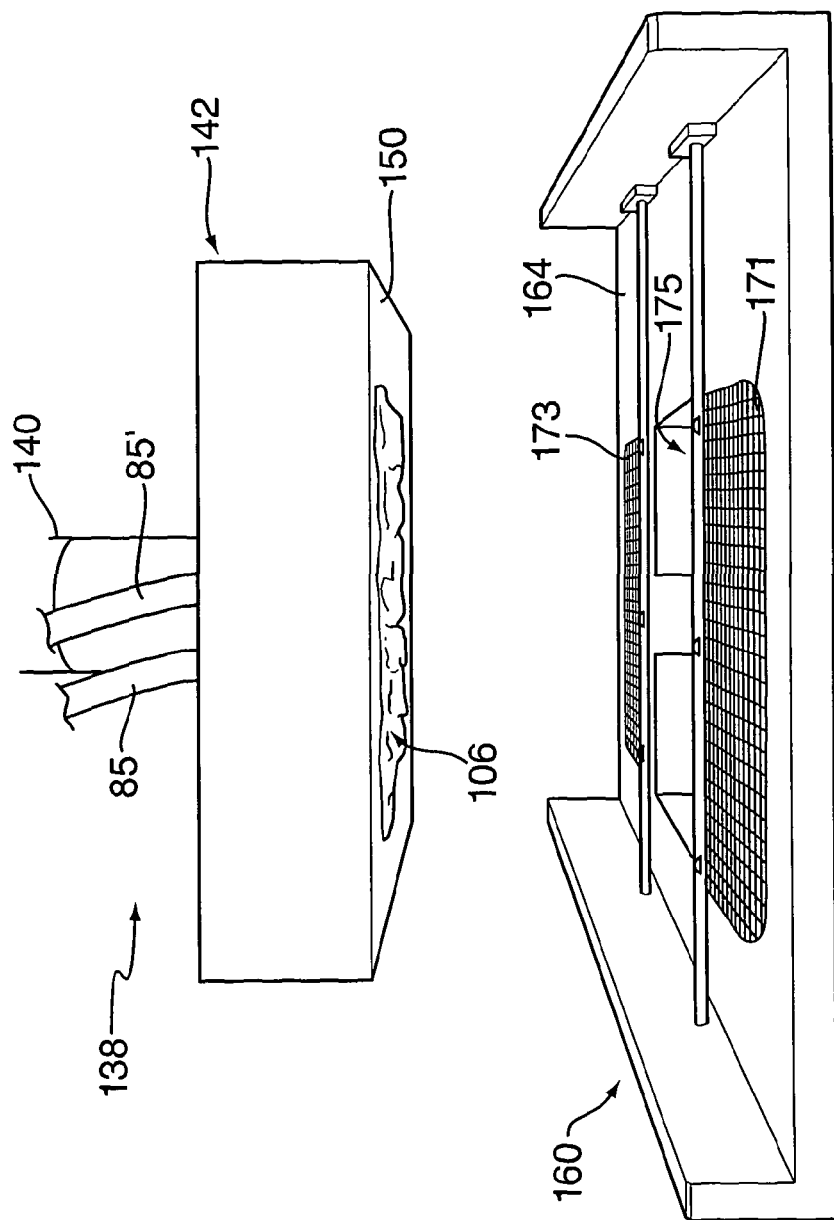


Fig. 13

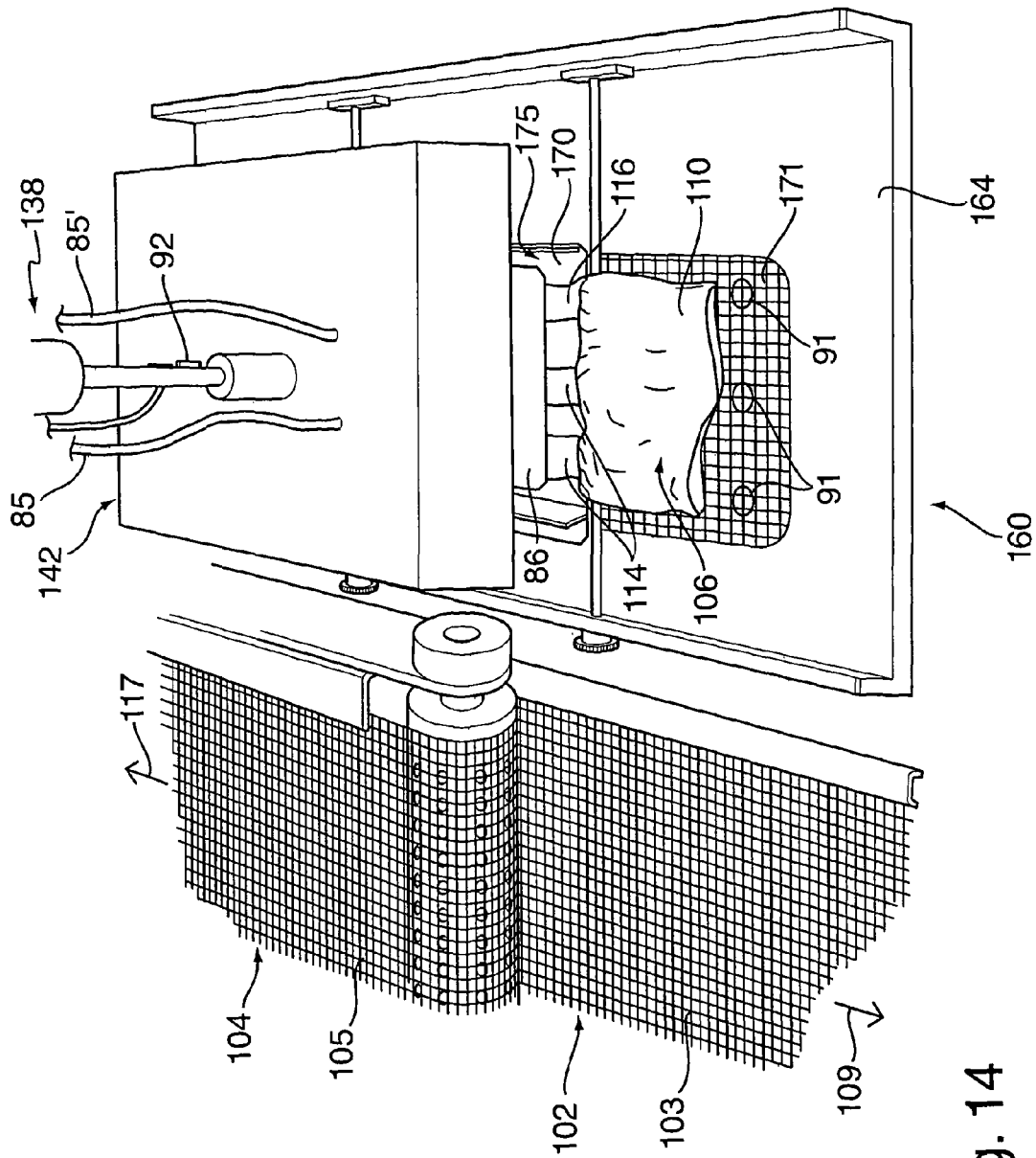


Fig. 14

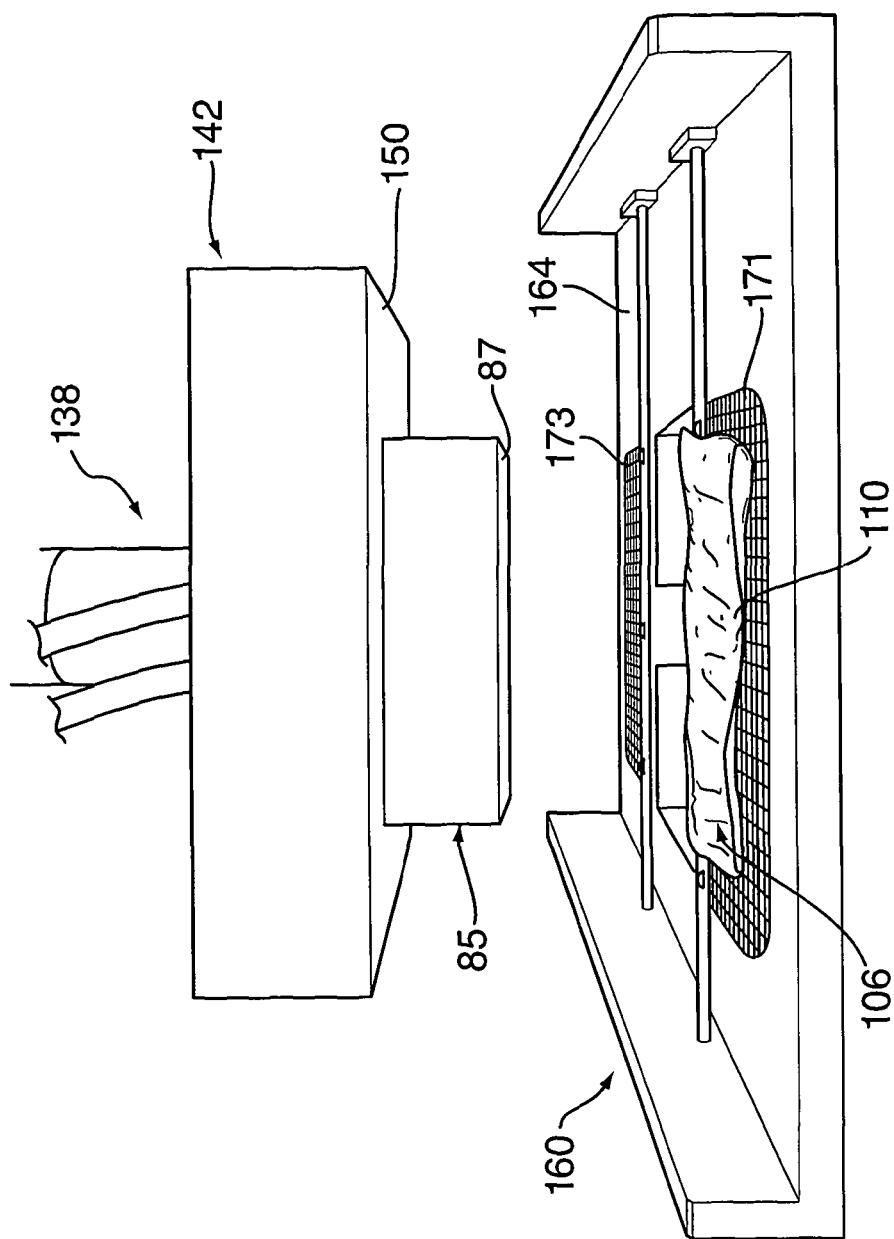


Fig. 15

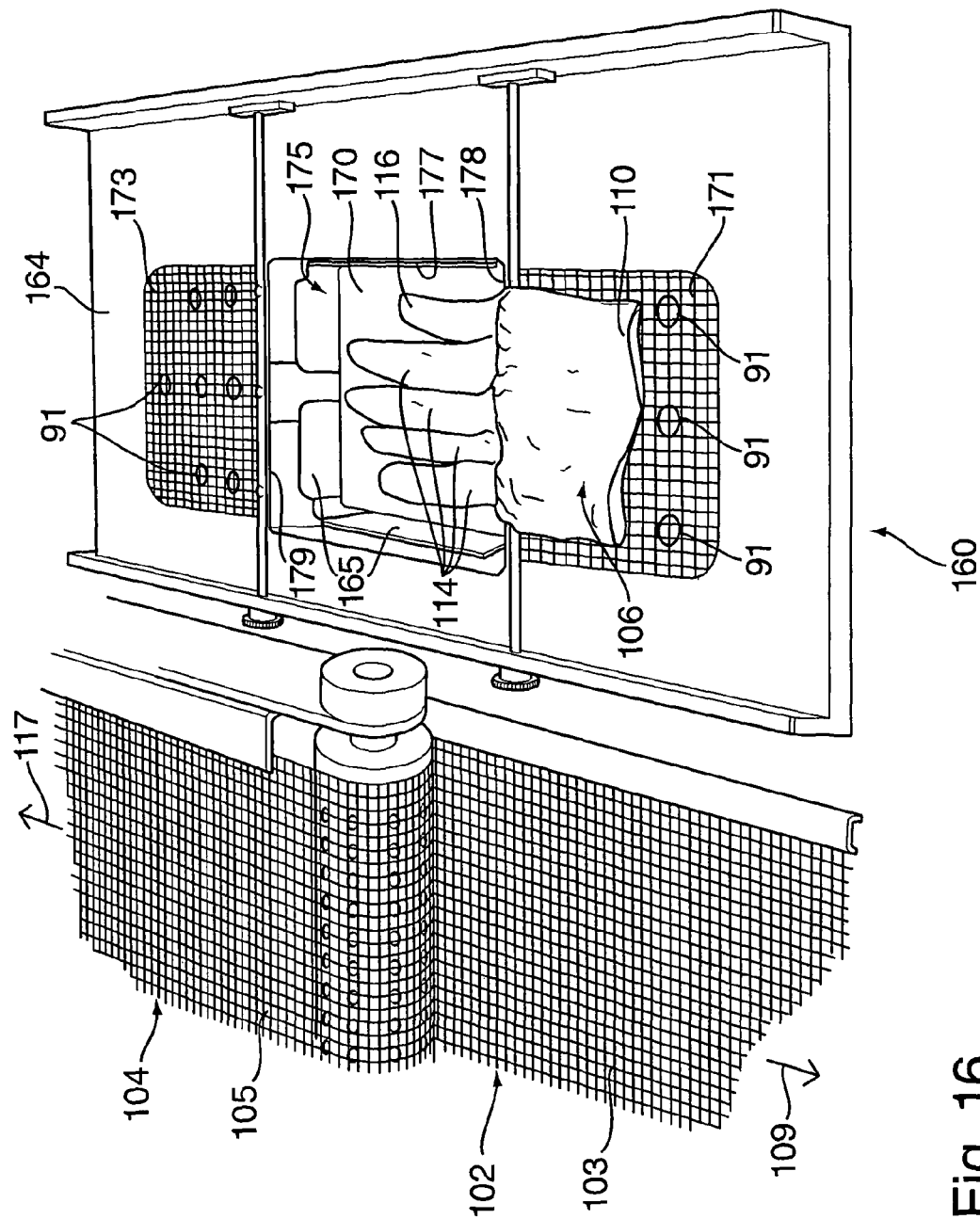


Fig. 16

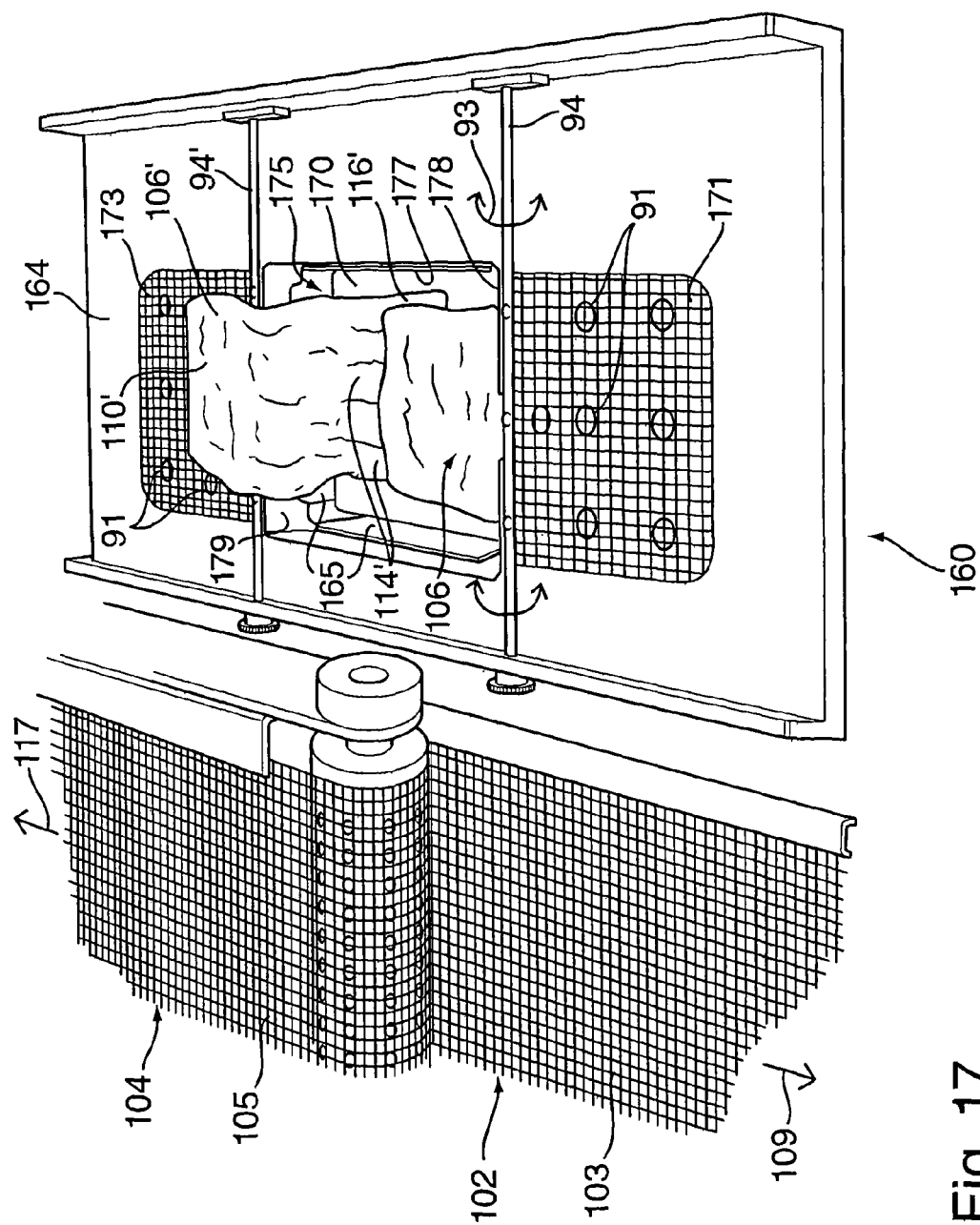


Fig. 17

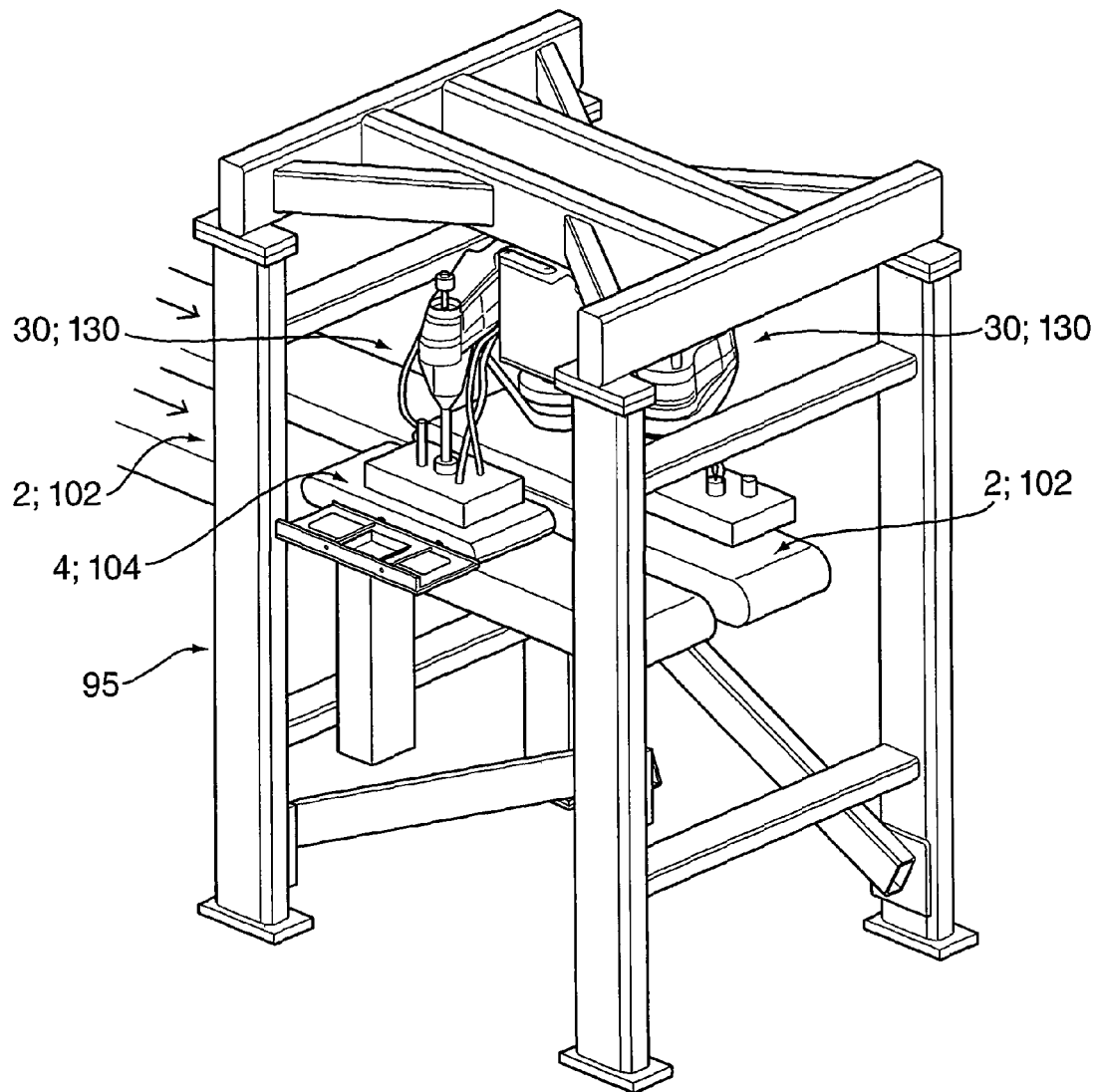


Fig. 18

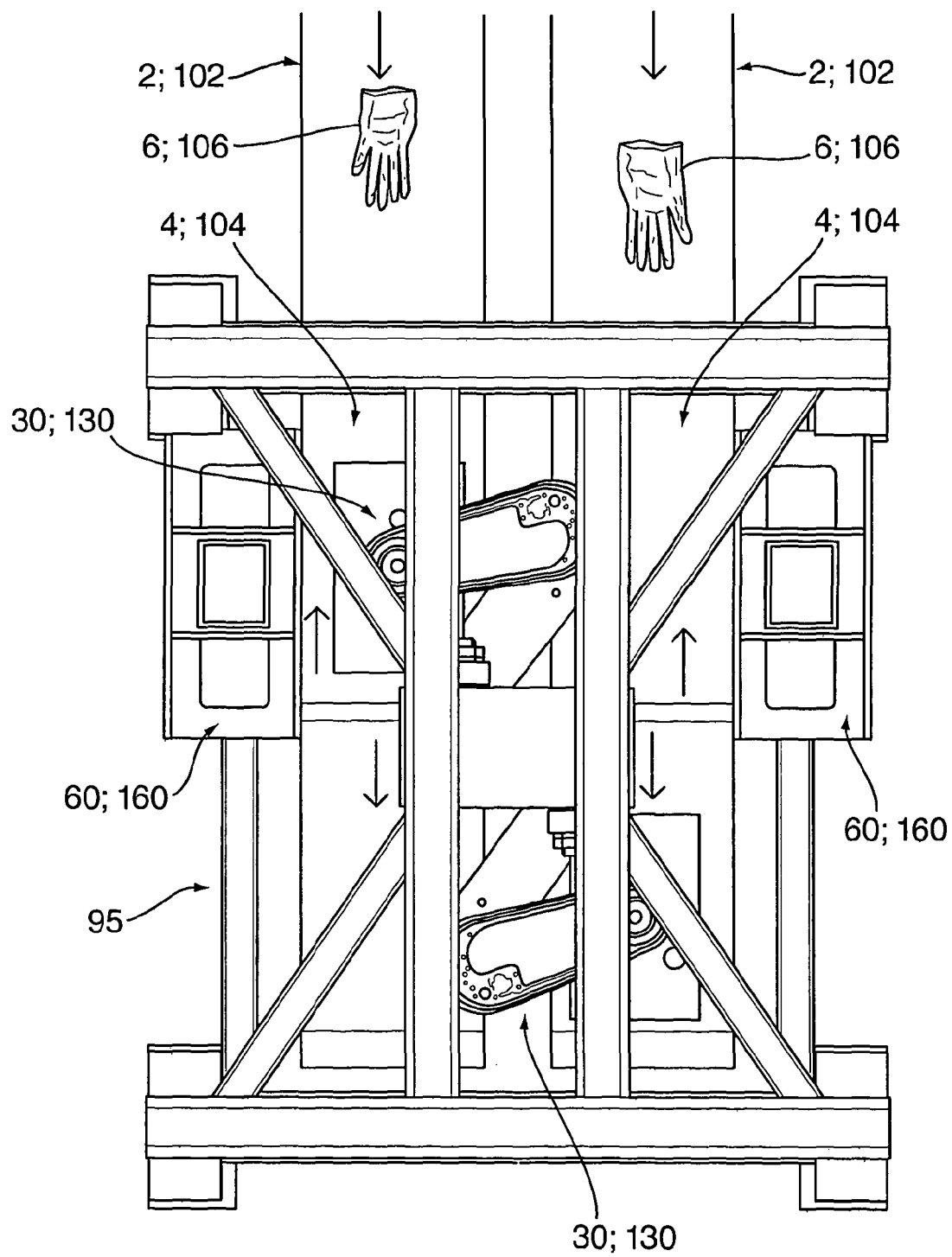


Fig. 19

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STACKING OF GLOVES

BACKGROUND

a. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a glove stacking apparatus for preparing a stack of gloves prior to packing into a box, and to a method of stacking gloves, particularly ambidextrous disposable hygienic gloves.

b. Related Art

The control of infection of patients in hospitals, clinics, and doctors' surgeries has become an ever more pressing concern with the rise of infectious bacteria resistant to multiple antibiotics, in particular methicillin-resistant *staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and *Clostridium difficile* (*C. difficile*). In the United Kingdom alone there are thought to be about 5,000 deaths a year from infections caught in hospitals but some experts believe the number could be as high as 20,000.

Disposable medical gloves can help prevent cross-contamination, but a problem arises if external parts of the glove touch the same areas of a dispensing container as have previously been touched by hands which are contaminated with harmful micro-organisms. Such external parts of the gloves can then become contaminated prior to contact with a patient, if these external parts are the fingers or palm area of the glove the likelihood of a patient being contaminated is dramatically increased.

Most gloves used in hospitals and clinics are examination gloves, and these are used in large numbers. Such gloves are supplied not in individual sterile packages, but in relatively inexpensive cardboard dispensing boxes. The size of boxed gloves is an issue owing to the need to minimise the space needed to store gloves, or the size of dispensing apparatus holding boxed gloves.

Because of the need to enhance infection control, the preferred method of dispensing these gloves is by the cuff, so that the user can only remove the gloves from the container by the cuffs rather than by the glove fingers. Examples of cuff first glove dispensing systems are disclosed in GB 2449087, GB 2457450 and GB 2454753. Gloves are packed in an inexpensive box, made from card material and having a removable cover over an opening, with each glove either packed flat or folded over on itself and with the cuff of each glove being presented towards the opening.

Although such cuff first glove dispensing systems are helpful in controlling contamination of the finger portions of each glove during dispensing and donning of each glove, a problem arises in how to pack the maximum number of gloves in each box for increased economy. Although it is possible to arrange gloves into a stack by hand, this is time consuming and relatively expensive in a production environment.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an apparatus and method for stacking gloves prior to packing in a dispensing box. It is also an object of the present invention to reduce the packing volume of boxed gloves.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to the invention, there is provided a glove stacking apparatus for forming a stack of gloves, comprising a packing recess for receiving said gloves to be stacked, and adjacent said recess at least one movable flap for folding towards the recess a portion of a glove overlapping said edge of the recess, and the glove stacking apparatus including a source of vacuum pressure and means to apply said vacuum air pressure in order to pull said overlapping portion of said glove to the flap prior to folding of said overlapping portion,

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characterised in that the movable flap has a surface that is permeable to gaseous flow through said surface, the source of vacuum pressure is separate from the flap and said vacuum air pressure being applied through said permeable surface of the movable flap so that as the flap folds towards the recess, the application of said vacuum air pressure through said permeable surface is automatically released.

The means to apply said vacuum air pressure may comprise at least one perforation in a work surface beneath permeable surface of the movable flap, and most preferably comprises a plurality of such perforations.

The source of vacuum pressure is preferably arranged to provide a steady vacuum pressure. The application of the vacuum air pressure through the permeable surface then depends on the degree of separation between the movable flap and the means to apply said vacuum air pressure through said permeable surface of the movable flap. As the flap moves towards the recess, the vacuum pressure is therefore automatically released.

In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the permeable surface of said flap is a mesh, this mesh being permeable to said flow.

The recess preferably has side walls for aligning gloves stacked one on another inside the recess and a movable floor which can be lowered as said stack of gloves grows so the topmost glove in the stack of gloves is substantially level with a top edge of the recess, which may be inset in a work surface.

The, or each, movable flap is preferably adjacent an edge of said recess for folding towards the recess a portion of a glove overlapping said edge of the recess. The, or each, flap may be hinged adjacent said edge.

In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the recess is substantially square or rectangular and there is a pair of said flaps on opposite side edges of the recess for folding alternately inwards to the recess portions of gloves overlapping alternately one or another of said opposite side edges.

Preferably, the, or each, flap is arranged to fold towards the recess such that, in use, the flap contacts the stack of gloves formed in the recess in order to help compress the stack of gloves.

The glove stacking apparatus may comprise a glove placement means and means for moving the floor downwardly. The glove placement means deposits gloves one of top of another for forming the stack of gloves, the glove placement means including a lifting surface with a vacuum glove lifting portion and a movable member within the lifting surface. The movable member is movable from a first position in which the movable member is substantially flush with the lifting surface to a second position in which the movable member stands proud of the lifting surface in order to help dislodge said lifted glove from the lifting surface. The packing recess receives the gloves and contains the stack as the stack is being formed. The means for moving the floor moves the floor downwardly so that the stack of gloves continues to be retained within the recess as gloves are added to the stack. The movable member is arranged, in use, to compress the stack of gloves within the recess after each glove is deposited.

Preferably, the compression of the stack of gloves by the movable member provides a motive force for the means for moving the floor downwardly.

Also according to the invention, there is provided a method of stacking gloves using a glove stacking apparatus, said apparatus comprising a glove placement means, a source of vacuum pressure, a packing recess for receiving said gloves to be stacked, and adjacent said recess at least one movable flap,

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the movable flap having a surface that is permeable to gaseous flow through said surface, the method comprising the steps of:

using the glove placement means to deposit a glove at said recess such that a portion of the glove is contained by said recess and another portion of said glove overlaps an edge of said recess and lies on said at least one movable flap;

applying the source of vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said flap to pull said portion of the deposited glove overlapping the edge of the recess onto said flap;

moving said at least one movable flap to fold towards the recess said portion of said glove overlapping said edge of the recess so that said glove is contained by said recess;

repeating the preceding steps to form a stack of gloves within the bounds of said recess

wherein the process of moving said flap to fold said portion of said glove causes said permeable surface to move away from the source of vacuum pressure so that said portion of the deposited glove overlapping the edge of the recess is no longer pulled onto said flap.

The recess may have a movable floor.

The method may therefore comprise the step of first moving the movable floor proximate the level of a top edge of the recess, which may be surrounded by a work surface. A first glove may then be placed over the recess, with a first cuff portion of this glove overlapping an edge of the recess. A second glove may then be placed over the recess, with a second cuff portion of this glove overlapping an edge of the recess.

If the recess has a movable floor, then this may then be lowered as required to keep the top of the stack of gloves in the recess substantially level with the work surface.

The, or each, movable flap may then be used to fold over said first cuff portion inwards towards the recess, so that the first cuff portion is folded over a finger portion of the second glove contained within the recess. These steps can then be repeated to build up a stack of interfolded gloves within the recess.

The glove stacking apparatus described above may be used in a stacking station as part of an apparatus for transporting and stacking gloves in a stack, comprising at least one conveyor for transporting said gloves to be stacked, a sensing means for sensing the presence of said transported gloves on said conveyor, a processing means. The glove placement means then moves said transported gloves from said glove conveyor to form the stack at the stacking station. The glove placement means includes a lifting and depositing portion for lifting each of the gloves to be moved from said conveyor and for depositing each of the lifted gloves at the stacking station. The processing means is connected to the sensing means and to the glove placement means for controlling the operation of the glove placement means in accordance with said sensed presence so that, in use, the lifting and depositing portion of the glove placement means lifts gloves from said conveyor and deposits said gloves on the glove stacking apparatus to form the stack.

The sensing means may sense additionally the orientation of a cuff portion and/or thumb portion of each of the transported gloves on the conveyor, and the processing means may be arranged to control the operation of the glove placement means in accordance with the sensed orientation so that, in use, the lifting and depositing portion of the glove placement means lifts gloves from the conveyor and deposits the gloves

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to form the stack with the cuff portion and/or the thumb portion of each glove in a desired orientation with respect to other gloves in the stack.

The apparatus for transporting and stacking gloves in a stack may comprise additionally a pneumatic system, the pneumatic system being arranged to apply a vacuum to the lifted glove in order to adhere the lifted glove to the lifting portion.

Preferably, the apparatus for transporting and stacking gloves in a stack comprises means to de-adhere the lifted glove for depositing at the stacking station.

For example, the pneumatic system may be arranged to apply a positive air pressure to the lifted glove in order to de-adhere the lifted glove for depositing at the stacking station.

The processing means may be connected to the pneumatic system for controlling the operation of the pneumatic system during the lifting and depositing of the gloves.

The stacking station comprises the packing recess in the work surface for containing the stack of gloves as gloves are deposited at the stacking station.

The lifting and depositing portion may include a lifting surface against which in use the gloves are held when moved and positioned by the glove placement means prior to depositing for stacking.

The lifting and depositing portion may include within the lifting surface a movable member, for example a downwardly acting piston. The movable member may be movable from a first position in which the movable member is substantially flush with the lifting surface to a second position in which the movable member stands proud of the lifting surface in order to help dislodge the lifted glove from the lifting surface prior to depositing for stacking.

The glove placement means may include lifting means with an attractive glove lifting surface. The method of stacking gloves may then comprise the steps of:

holding a glove to the glove placement means using the attractive lifting surface;

using the glove placement means to move the held glove into position for depositing at the recess; and

using the source of vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said flap to help pull said lifted glove off the attractive lifting surface so that the glove is deposited at said recess.

The attractive lifting surface may be an electrostatic lifting surface, but is most preferably a vacuum lifting surface.

The movable member may also have a surface that is permeable to air flow, the glove lifting means including a source of positive air pressure and means to control the application of this positive air pressure through the permeable surface of the movable member in order to control the dislodging of a lifted glove from the glove lifting surface.

The glove placement means includes a glove manipulator that comprises a lifting portion for lifting each of the moved gloves from the first and second conveying means. The lifting portion preferably also serves to deposit the glove at a stacking station, in which case the lifting portion is a lifting and depositing portion of the glove manipulator.

The glove manipulator may include an electrostatic generator for applying an electrostatic charge to the lifted glove in order to adhere this glove to the lifting and depositing portion. The glove manipulator may, however, comprise additionally or alternatively a pneumatic system for sucking the glove to the lifting and depositing portion and preferably also for depositing the glove.

The lifting portion of the glove manipulator may be an underside or lowermost portion of the glove manipulator.

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The lifting and depositing portion may comprise means for depositing each lifted glove, for example when moved into position with a stack of gloves built up during previous cycles of lifting and depositing gloves.

The glove manipulator may comprise means for rotating the lifted glove about an axis, which will most commonly be a vertical axis, parallel with a stacking axis of the deposited gloves.

When the glove is in position for depositing, the glove may then be dropped on top of a stack of gloves being built up by the glove stacking apparatus.

The glove stacking apparatus according to the invention is preferably used in conjunction with the glove placement means for moving gloves to be packed, comprising the lifting means for lifting each of said moved gloves, said lifting means including the attractive glove lifting surface.

In one embodiment, a glove lifting portion of said lifting surface is permeable to air flow through said surface, and the glove lifting means includes a source of vacuum pressure and means to control the application of said vacuum air pressure through the permeable glove lifting portion of the lifting surface in order to control the lifting of gloves by the glove placement means.

In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the glove stacking apparatus is used with an apparatus for manipulating gloves presented flat for stacking by a transporting surface, comprising a glove manipulator comprising a lifting portion, said lifting portion having a downwardly directed surface for lifting each of said moved gloves from said transporting surface, and a means for attracting said lifted glove to said downwardly directed surface in order to hold said lifted glove to said downwardly directed surface of the lifting portion as gloves are manipulated for stacking.

The means for attracting a lifted glove to the downwardly directed surface may comprise an electrostatic generator for applying an electrostatic charge to a lifted glove in order to adhere the lifted glove to the downwardly directed surface of the lifting portion.

Alternatively or additionally, the means for attracting a lifted glove to the downwardly directed surface may comprise a pneumatic system for applying a vacuum to a lifted glove in order to adhere the lifted glove to the downwardly directed surface of the lifting portion.

The means for attracting a lifted glove to the downwardly directed surface may comprise a ground plate to which the electrostatically charged glove is attracted. In one embodiment, the apparatus includes a plurality of insulating strands strung over and separated from the ground plate, the strands serving in use to support and separate the electrostatically charged glove from the ground plate. In another embodiment, the invention comprises an insulating plate, the insulating plate having a plurality of perforations through the electrostatically charged glove is the electrostatically charged glove is attracted to the ground plate, the insulating plate serving in use to support and separate the electrostatically charged glove from the ground plate.

Preferably, the lifting portion has means for discharging the electrostatic charge on the glove prior to said depositing of the glove. Once the electrostatic charge has been discharged, the glove will either fall from the lifting portion or can be readily assisted to fall, for example with a puff of compressed air applied to the interface between the lifting and depositing portion and the glove.

The lifting and depositing portion may have means for increasing the separation between the charged glove and the ground plate in order to lessen the electrostatic attraction between the glove and the ground plate prior to dropping the

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glove for stacking. These means may include one or more pins that project downwards of the lifting means, most preferably in areas not covered over by lifted gloves.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention will now be further described, by way of example only, and with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 is perspective view of an apparatus for stacking ambidextrous gloves including a glove stacking apparatus for preparing a stack of gloves prior to packing into a box according to a first preferred embodiment of the invention, showing how gloves are transported by a first conveying means, past a machine vision system towards a second conveying means to which gloves may be transferred to reverse the handedness of the orientation of the glove with respect to a glove placement means;

FIGS. 2 and 3 are, respectively, side and top views of the apparatus of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is a perspective view of a first embodiment of a glove placement means having a glove manipulator for lifting gloves from the conveyors and, if necessary, for rotating the orientation of the glove about a vertical axis prior to depositing on a stack of gloves;

FIG. 5 is a side view of the glove manipulator of FIG. 4, showing how a glove is held electrostatically to a lowermost insulating surface of the glove manipulator;

FIG. 6 is a bottom view of the glove manipulator of FIG. 4, showing how the glove is held flat against the insulating surface, which has an array of perforations behind which is a ground plate to which the glove is attracted;

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of a second embodiment of a glove manipulator for lifting gloves from the conveyors in which the gloves held against an array of insulating strands behind which is a ground plate to which the glove is attracted;

FIG. 8 is a view from beneath of the glove manipulator of FIG. 7;

FIG. 9 is a cross-section view of the glove manipulator, taken along line IX-IX of FIG. 8;

FIG. 10 is an enlarged view of a portion of the cross-section of FIG. 9 labeled X;

FIG. 11 is a perspective view, partly cut-away, showing part of an apparatus for stacking ambidextrous gloves, according to a second preferred embodiment of the invention including a glove stacking apparatus for preparing a stack of gloves prior to packing into a box, having a vacuum air supply for transferring gloves to the second conveyor and for holding gloves to the underside of a glove manipulator;

FIG. 12 is perspective view of the first and second conveyors of FIG. 11 and an adjacent stacking station prior to stacking of gloves by the glove placement means;

FIG. 13 is a perspective view of the stacking station of FIG. 12 with the glove manipulator ready to deposit a first glove at the stacking station;

FIG. 14 is a view of the glove manipulator of FIG. 12 after depositing of the first glove at the stacking station, showing how a movable member in the form of a plunger descends from beneath the glove manipulator to press a finger portion of the glove into a packing recess;

FIG. 15 shows the stacking station of FIG. 14 when the glove manipulator has been withdrawn from the stacking station to collect a second glove;

FIG. 16 shows the stacking station of FIG. 15 after the glove manipulator has been withdrawn, with a cuff of the

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deposited glove extending beyond the packing recess and lying over a first movable flap on one side of the packing recess;

FIG. 17 shows how, after the deposit of a second glove oriented oppositely with respect to the first glove, but with thumbs on the same side of the packing recess, the first movable flap is rotated about a pivot rod to fold the cuff of the first glove over the finger portion of the second glove;

FIG. 18 is perspective view showing how the apparatus for stacking gloves may be paired and how two of the glove placement means may be mounted on a frame from above; and

FIG. 19 is a top view of the paired apparatus for stacking gloves of FIG. 18.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIGS. 1 to 3 show various views of a glove stacking apparatus 1 for stacking gloves with the thumbs in a desired orientation. The apparatus comprises a first conveying means in the form of a first conveyor 2 and a second conveying means in the form of a second conveyor 4. Both the first and second conveyors have straight loops of belt 3, 5, with an upper surface 7 of the first conveyor 2 travelling in a first direction indicated by arrow 9. The second conveyor 4 lies atop the first conveyor 2 with a lower portion 11 of the second conveyor belt 5 being opposed to a transfer portion 13 of the first conveyor belt 3, these portions 11, 13 being separated by about 1 mm and moving at matched speeds in the same direction 9 so that an upper surface 15 of the second belt 5 moves in a second direction 17 opposite to the first direction 9.

A supply of gloves 6 held within a bin 8 is brought to the vicinity of an upstream end 19 of the first conveyor 2. The gloves 6 in the bin 8 are not fully ordered but preferably have a cuff end 10 facing towards an open side 12 of the bin 8, which is positioned above the upper surface 7 of the first belt.

The gloves 6 in the bin are oriented with the glove fingers 14 and thumb 16 facing generally in a direction parallel with the first direction of motion 9 of the first conveyor 2. A worker (not shown) may then reach into the open side 12 of the bin 8 and get hold of a glove 6 by the cuff 10 and pull the gloves in the second direction 17 one at a time onto the upper surface 7 of the first belt 3, such that the fingers drag along the first belt upper surface 7.

In doing this, the opposite motions of the gloves 6 and first belt 3 will tend to pull the fingers 14 and thumb 16 of each glove flat with the belt. In the embodiment of the invention, the gloves 6 are disposable ambidextrous medical inspection gloves, although the invention is applicable to other types of hygienic glove. It is not necessary for the thumbs 16 to be positioned on either the right or the left of the glove, as viewed in the direction of motion 9. A machine vision sensing device 20 under the control of a microprocessor (not shown) is used to capture from above an image of each glove 6A placed on the upstream end 19 of the first belt 3. The machine vision sensing device 20 is not described or shown in detail but may include a camera or other light sensing means, a source of illumination such as a flash lamp, one or more scanning or static laser beams or a light curtain.

The processor determines from the captured image if the thumb 16 is on the left or right of the glove 6A and also determines if there is a problem with the orientation of the glove, as may be the case if the fingers 14 or thumb 16 are not splayed outwards and are overlapping, or if the cuff 10 is over-folded or under-folded.

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The gloves 6A then pass to a rejection region 22 of the apparatus. The first belt 3 is a mesh fabric belt having holes of about 4 mm in size. The fabric preferably has insulating properties, for example being formed from a PTFE fabric material. Beneath the rejection region 22 is a valve 23 connected to a source of compressed air (not shown) which under the control of the processor sends a blast of air upwards and to one side of the first belt 3 to eject a misaligned glove off and to one side of the belt, where such rejected gloves are caught by a recycle bin (not shown) for subsequent recycling through the glove stacking apparatus 1.

If the gloves are to be stacked in a regular way, and if the gloves are randomly placed on the first belt 3, with the thumb 16 either to the left or the right relative to the direction of motion, then the processor will determine, on average, that 50% of the gloves are in a correct orientation for stacking, and 50% are not. In the illustrated example, one glove 6B has reached the vicinity of a downstream end 29 of the first conveyor 2. This glove has been determined by the processor to be correctly oriented for stacking. Another glove 6C is shown on the upper surface of the second belt 5. This glove 6C was found by the processor to be in the incorrect orientation for stacking by the processor when on the first belt 3 and has been transferred from the transfer portion 13 of the first belt 3 to the lower portion 11 of the second belt 5, prior to being conveyed by the loop of the second belt onto the upper surface 15 of the second conveyor 4. This operation has the effect of flipping the glove 6C through 180° around a horizontal axis at right angles to the direction of motion 9 of the first conveyor 2, such that the handedness of each of the gloves 6C transferred to the second conveyor 4 is reversed from a left handed orientation to a right handed orientation or alternatively from a right handed orientation to a left handed orientation as the second conveyor transports the gloves. As will become clear from the explanation below, this then positions the illustrated glove 6C in a correct orientation for stacking.

It should be noted that the first and second belts 3, 5 in the region 11, 13 where these overlap move at the same speed and direction 9 with synchronicity being maintained by a 1:1 drive belt and pulley arrangement 27 connecting the first and second conveyors 2, 4.

The glove stacking apparatus 1 also comprises a glove placement means 30, which is here an articulated robot arm 32 that extends away from a first vertical axis pivot 34 towards a second vertical axis pivot 35 on which a glove manipulator 38 is pivotably mounted. In addition to being pivotable about the second pivot 35, the manipulator has a vertical and rotational axis movement mechanism 40 that extends downwards to an attractive lifting and depositing portion 42 of the glove manipulator 38, a first and a second embodiment 42, 42' of which using electrostatic attraction are illustrated in FIGS. 4 to 10 and a third embodiment of which 142 using a vacuum, or negative pressure, supply is shown in FIGS. 11 to 19.

As will be explained in more detail below, the glove manipulator 38 moves the lifting and depositing portion 42, 42' so that this is above the next glove to be stacked, and then lifts and moves this glove either from the first conveyor 2 or the second conveyor 4 and deposits this to one side of the downstream end 29 of the first belt 3 at a stacking station 60, where the glove 6B, 6C is deposited for stacking.

The gloves 6C are transferred from the first to the second conveyors by means of a static electricity generator 25 comprising a static generating bar positioned beneath the portion 13 of the first belt 3 opposite the second belt 5. The charge passes through the air and holes in the first belt mesh to charge up the glove 6C to be transferred. The second belt 5 is a mesh with an insulating outer surface and with a ground plate (not

shown) behind in the region where the glove is transferred. Gloves 6C once charged are therefore initially electrostatically attracted to the second belt 5 and leave the first belt 3, which also has an insulating outer surface, to travel around the loop of the second belt 5 to reach the upper surface 15 of the second conveyor 4. A second static charge electricity generator 33 comprising a static generating bar positioned beneath the upper surface 15 of the second belt 5 then recharges the glove. The charge passes through the air and holes in the first belt mesh to re-charge up the glove 6C. There is no ground plate behind the mesh of the second belt in this region, and so the glove is free to be attracted to another ground surface, which as explained below is provided in the lifting and depositing portion 42, 42'.

The lifting and depositing portion 42, 42' of the glove placement means 30 is synchronized with the continuous motion of the belts 3, 5 and under the control of the same processor registering the location and portion of each glove 6A by means of the machine vision system 20. Alternatively, it would be possible to have a second machine vision system (not shown) to register the position and of the gloves 6B, 6C ready for stacking. It should be noted that in the drawing, both gloves 6B and 6C are shown for purposes of illustration only in position ready for lifting by the lifting and depositing portion 42, 42'. Because the belts 3, 5 move continuously at a constant speed, preferably about 300 mm per second, in operation, only one of the illustrated gloves 6B, 6C would be positioned ready for lifting at any one time.

The lifting and depositing portion 42, 42' then moves into position above the glove 6B, 6C to be lifted. The lifting and depositing portion is rectangular, and is rotated by the movement mechanism 40 so that the long axis of the rectangle is aligned with the long axis of the glove. If the long axis of the glove 6B, 6C is not aligned exactly with the length of the belts 3, 5, then this is detected by the image sensing system 20 and the angle of the lifting and depositing portion 42, 42' is correspondingly adjusted by the rotational axis movement mechanism 40 to match that of the glove prior to lifting the glove from the belt 3, 5. The movement of the belts 3, 5 is continuous so the arm 32 and glove manipulator 38 match the movement of the glove 6B, 6C on the conveyor 2, 4 while the vertical axis movement mechanism 40 drops the lifting and depositing portion 42, 42' on top of the glove.

As shown in FIGS. 5 and 6, the first embodiment of the lifting and depositing portion 42 has a flat under surface 50, which is made from a thin plate insulating material having an array of circular holes 52, behind which is an insulated ground plate 54. Although not visible in FIGS. 5 and 6, the ground plate 54 is covered over by a thin insulative sheet to prevent direct discharge from a charged glove to the ground plate.

The gloves 6B are transferred from the first conveyor to the lifting and depositing portion by means of a static electricity generator 31 comprising a static generating bar positioned beneath the surface of the first belt 5. The charge passes through the air and holes in the first belt mesh to charge up the glove 6B. As the lifting and depositing portion comes into proximity with the charged glove, the glove is attracted to the underside 50 of the lifting and depositing portion 42, which therefore acts as a glove lifting surface having an attractive glove lifting portion.

As the lifting and depositing portion 42 comes into proximity with the glove 6B, 6C to be lifted, the charged glove is attracted to the insulated ground plate 54 and therefore adheres to the outer plate surface 50.

The lifting and depositing portion 42 can then remove the glove 6B, 6C from the belt 3, 5 and deposit the glove at the

stacking station 60. The glove is de-adhered from the lifting and depositing portion by moving the ground plate 54 away from the outer insulative layer 50. Additionally, the lifting portion also contains an electrostatic generator 56, the location of which is indicated by dashed lines, aligned with corresponding holes in the outer plate 50 and ground plate 54. This applies a charge one side of the glove which it has been found can help to collapse the glove and help the glove adhere better to the stack of glove being built up at the stacking station 60.

This ground plate is movable in a vertical direction within the lifting and depositing portion 42 and is spring biased to a downwards location nearest the outer layer 50. Four pins or studs 58 project downwards from the ground plate through the outer layer 50. When the lifting and depositing portion comes into contact with surfaces at the stacking station 60, these pins are pressed upwards thereby lifting the ground plate and thereby lessening the attraction of the glove 6B, 6C to the ground plate 54 whereupon the glove drops away from the lifting and depositing portion. Although not illustrated, if needed, the manipulator 30 may be connected to a source of compressed air which may be used to send a blast of air through the holes 52 to dislodge the glove from the outer layer 50.

The second embodiment of electrostatic lifting and depositing portion 42' works in a similar manner to that described above. In this embodiment, there is no outer layer, but rather a series of parallel insulating threads or strands 50', which serve to separate the glove 6B, 6C from the ground plate 54'. FIG. 9 shows the static electricity generators 56' within the lifting portion and the enlarged cross-section view of FIG. 10 shows the insulative layer 68 on the ground plate 54'. FIGS. 9 and 10 show schematically how the glove 6B, 6C is adhered against the parallel insulating threads or strands 50'. In this case, the ground plate 54' acts as a glove lifting surface having an attractive glove lifting portion.

As with the first embodiment, the electrostatic lifting and depositing portion 42' described above has four pins or studs 58' that project downwards from the ground plate 54' through the parallel insulating threads or strands 50'. When the lifting and depositing portion comes into contact with surfaces at the stacking station 60, these pins are pressed upwards thereby lifting the ground plate and thereby lessening the attraction of the glove 6B, 6C to the ground plate 54' whereupon the glove drops away from the lifting and depositing portion.

The stacking station 60 shown in FIGS. 1 to 3 will now be described in more detail. The stacking station 60 has a packing sleeve 62, inset in a work surface 64. The packing sleeve 62 extends vertically and has a substantially rectangular horizontal cross-section with rounded corners. The sleeve is formed from folded sheet metal, preferably stainless steel.

The packing sleeve 62 contains a movable base 70 that provides a floor surface and that is slightly recessed to provide a shallow receptacle 75 for receiving gloves being stacked. Prior to stacking of gloves, the floor 70 is initially substantially at the level of the work surface 64 or recessed slightly, for example recessed by between 10 mm to 25 mm. As gloves are stacked on the floor, the movable base 70 drops so that the topmost stacked glove remained substantially at, or just below, the level of the work surface 64. The next glove to be stacked then lies flat above the previously stacked gloves and surrounding work surface 64.

The sleeve walls 65 and base 70 define a recess or receptacle the cross-section of which is less than the flattened extent of the gloves 6B, 6C. Portions of the gloves to be stacked therefore overlap edges 67 of the receptacle. In this example, the receptacle 75 is sized such that when the glove

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fingers **14** are aligned within the receptacle, the glove cuffs **10** will initially extend beyond the bounds of the receptacle. The stacking station therefore contains two movable and generally rectangular or square flaps **71**, **73**, arranged on opposite sides **78**, **79** of the receptacle **75** which initially lie flat or flush with the work surface **64**. Each flap is pivoted along a straight edge nearest the receptacle, with one of each pair being on adjacent sides of the receptacle so that the paired flaps can fold inwards the overlapping portions of each glove from adjacent sides.

In use, a glove is placed with the finger portions **14** being fully within the confines of the side walls **65** and with the thumb **16** being on the right hand side of the receptacle **75**, as viewed in the first direction **9**. Optionally, there may be two additional movable and generally rectangular or square flaps **72**, **74** on a "thumb" side **77** of the receptacle between the two opposite sides **78**, **79**. Each of these flaps **72**, **74** is pivoted along a straight edge nearest the receptacle. In the event that the thumb **16** extends beyond the bounds of the receptacle, the thumb **16** may be first folded over by one of the flaps **72**, which then returns to lie flush with the work surface **64**.

The next glove is then positioned on top of the first glove, with the finger portions **14** again being fully confined by the side walls but oriented at 180° to the first glove so that the cuffs of the first two gloves extend away from one another and overlap opposite sides **78**, **79** of the receptacle **75**. The thumb **16** is first folded over by one of the flaps **74**, which then returns to lie flush with the work surface **64**.

The cuff **10** of the first glove to be placed on the work surface **64** is then folded over the finger portion **14** of the second glove, using the other one **71** of the pair of flaps, which then returns to lie flush with the work surface. The thumb **16** may then be first folded over by one of the flaps **72**, which then returns to lie flush with the work surface.

If there are no flaps **72**, **74** to fold in thumbs, then the thumbs will gradually fall into the receptacle **75** as the base floor **70** is lowered.

A third glove is then placed on the second glove, in the same orientation as the first glove was placed.

The cuff of the second glove to be placed on the work surface **64** is then folded over the finger portion of the third glove, using the other one **73** of the pair of flaps, which then returns to lie flush with the work surface.

In this way an interfolded stack of gloves for cuff first dispensing from a box dispenser, can be built up automatically. During dispensing, the cuff of the glove being dispensed is gripped and removed from a container (not shown), and as the fingers of that glove are pulled out of the container, the fingers of that glove pull out the cuff of the next glove for dispensing.

When sufficient gloves have been stacked in the receptacle, for example between about 100 and 150 gloves, the stacking operation is paused, and the receptacle **75** is removed from the stacking station **60**, either automatically or manually, and an empty receptacle is put in place at the stacking station, and the operation described above is repeated.

Although not illustrated or described in detail herein, once the gloves are stacked in the receptacle, the stacked gloves may be packed in a box dispenser by placing an open mouth of the box over the receptacle and moving the base **70** upwards to press the stacked gloves into the open box, which may then be closed and sealed.

FIGS. **11** to **17** show various views of a second embodiment of an apparatus **101** for stacking ambidextrous gloves, according to a second preferred embodiment of the invention.

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In the second embodiment, features similar to those of the first embodiment are indicated by reference numerals incremented by 100.

The second embodiment includes a machine vision sensing device (not shown) the same as that described above and has first and second conveyors **102**, **104** that present gloves to a glove placement means **130** in the same manner as described above.

The second embodiment **101** differs from the first embodiment **1** in that there is no use of electrostatic transfer means. Instead, a vacuum air supply (not shown) is used in the transfer of gloves from the first conveyor **102** to the second conveyor **104**, and is also used to hold a glove to the underside **150** of a pneumatic lifting and depositing portion **142** of the glove manipulator **138**. In this example, the underside **150** of the lifting and depositing portion **142** acts as a glove lifting surface having an attractive glove lifting portion. The vacuum air supply is connected to an air outlet connection **80** at one end of a cylindrical roller **81** in the second conveyor **104** around which gloves **106C** must pass to reach the upper surface **115** of the second mesh belt **105**. The roller **81** is hollow (not shown) and has a number perforations **83** across its width and around its circumference so that when the hollow interior of the roller is connected to the air outlet **80** a vacuum air pressure at the outlet causes air to be sucked through the perforations. This causes a glove **106C** on the first mesh belt **103** to be transferred to the second belt **105** at the roller **81**.

Prior to this transfer, the glove **106C** is retained to the first mesh belt **103** by a similar vacuum supply that sucks air through the first belt to keep the glove **106C** flat on the belt and so the glove can be conveyed without interference in a 1 mm to 2 mm gap **96** between the belts **103**, **105**. When a glove is to be transferred to the second conveyor **104**, the vacuum air supply to the first belt is stopped at the same time as the vacuum air supply to the roller **81** is started. When a glove is not to be transferred to the second conveyor **104**, the vacuum air supply to the first belt **103** is maintained and the vacuum air supply to the roller **81** is kept off, so that the glove is conveyed by the first conveyor **102** past the transfer region between the first and second belts. In this case, to ensure that the glove clears the second belt **105**, the vacuum air supply through the mesh of the first belt **103** is preferably provided underneath and beyond the second conveyor **104**. Not shown are valves and a control system linked to the processor for synchronizing the operation of the vacuum air supply to the first belt and the second belt roller with the rest of apparatus.

The lifting and depositing portion **142** has an internal pressure chamber **84** which is supplied by one or two air hoses **85**, **85'** connected to another air supply via control valves (not shown) which can provide either negative or positive air pressure relative to ambient air pressure. Air passes in to or out from the air chamber through perforations **88** in a flat main plate **150** on the underside of the lifting and depositing portion **142**. A downwardly acting piston **86** is provided in a portion of the main plate **150**. The main plate is generally rectangular with a long axis extending in the same directions as the direction of movement **109**, **117** of the first and second conveyors **102**, **104** when the lifting and depositing portion **142** is oriented to collect or deposit gloves. The piston **86** has a flat lower plate **87** which is co-planar with the surrounding main plate **150** when the piston is raised as shown in FIG. **13**, and which extends below the plane of the main plate when extended, as illustrated in FIGS. **11** and **15**. Both the main plate **150** and the piston plate **87** have a two-dimensional array of perforations **88**, **89** subject to the same air pressure from the air chamber **84**.

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If the gloves are to be stacked with the cuffs **110** all facing one way, then the piston **86** is preferably off-center to one end of the rectangular main plate **150**, as shown in FIG. **11**. If, however, the gloves are to be stacked with the cuffs alternating in opposite directions, then the piston is preferably centered in the main plate **150**, as shown in FIGS. **13**, **14** and **15**. In both cases, when a glove is picked up by the lifting and depositing portion **142** a vacuum or negative pressure is applied to the chamber **84** as the main plate **150** is brought down against a glove on one of the conveyors. The air flow into the perforations then pulls the glove off the conveyor and onto the under surface of the lifting and depositing portion **142**. The glove is preferably picked up with the finger portion **114** (which include the thumb **116**), in contact with the retracted piston lower plate **87** and with the cuff portion adhered by the vacuum to the adjacent main plate **150**.

FIG. **12** shows the adjacent stacking station **160** prior to stacking of gloves by the glove placement means **130** in the packing receptacle **175**. FIG. **13** shows the glove manipulator **138** positioned ready to deposit the first glove **106** in the packing receptacle **175**, with a negative pressure being supplied to the internal chamber **84** through an air supply line **85**.

FIG. **14** is a view of the glove manipulator **138** after depositing of the first glove at the stacking station **160**, showing how the piston **86** descends from beneath the lifting and depositing portion **142** to press a finger portion **114**, **116** of the glove **106** into the packing recess **175**. When the lifting and depositing portion **142** is ready to deposit the glove **106**, the vacuum from air line **85** is switched off and a positive pressure is supplied to the internal chamber **84** through air line **85'**. At the same time, a negative pressure is continuously provided through other air lines **90**, **90'** (see FIG. **11**) which lead to an array of perforations **91** in a work surface **164** beneath two movable and generally rectangular or square PTFE mesh flaps **171**, **173**, arranged on opposite sides **178**, **179** of the receptacle **175**. In this way, the glove **106** is both pushed off and pulled from the lifting and depositing portion **142**. This pneumatic action of the apparatus helps to press the glove flat against the surfaces of the stacking station **160**. It will generally still be the case, however, that air is trapped inside the glove, particularly the glove finger portion **114**, **116**.

Before the lifting and depositing head is withdrawn upwards, the piston **86** is therefore actuated downwards by means of a pneumatically driven actuator **92** to compress the finger portions of the glove **106**. This pressure helps to drive out air trapped inside the glove, thereby compressing and flattening the stack of gloves with a consequent reduction in the height of the stack of gloves. As this process is repeated for each glove that is deposited, the multiple compressions of the growing stack of gloves helps to ensure that the flexible glove material does not rebound to let air creep back into the stack. The final height of the complete stack of gloves is thereby minimized so that the maximum number of interfolded gloves can be provided to the end user within each completed pack. The end result is that it is possible to pack 100 or more disposable interfolded nitrile or latex gloves of standard thickness (rated at 9 Newton's tear strength) inside a card material box having external dimensions of about 130 mm wide by 120 mm deep by 130 mm high. The invention also permits 200 disposable interfolded nitrile or latex gloves of thinner thickness (rated at 6 Newton's tear strength) inside a card material box having external dimensions of about 130 mm wide by 120 mm deep by 165 mm high. The card material may be cardboard, a plastic card material or any other suitable disposable thin sheet material.

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The compression of the growing stack of gloves by the piston is also used in an automatic way to control the downward movement of the moveable floor **170**. Pressure from the piston **86** causes the floor **170** to move down in a controlled manner during glove stacking such that the topmost stacked glove remains substantially at, or just below, the level of the work surface **164**. Because the piston downward movement is fixed, and because the resulting downward movement of the floor is driven purely by the piston pressure, floor moves only as far as is necessary to depending on the height of the glove stack.

The floor may be supported by an upwardly acting spring mechanism **97**, with an associated ratchet mechanism permitting only downward movement of the floor under the piston pressure.

After this depositing and compressing stage, the lifting and depositing portion is lifted, as shown in FIG. **15**, after which the glove manipulator **138** is withdrawn from the stacking station **160** to collect a second glove **106'**.

The flaps **171**, **173** are then used to fold portions **110** of the second last deposited glove extending beyond the bounds of the recess in towards the recess so that the cuff of this glove is folded over the finger portion of the last glove to be deposited. It should be noted that because the vacuum supply is completely separate from the body of the flaps, there is no need to cut or reduce the vacuum air supply to the perforations **91** in the work surface **164**. As soon as the flaps begin to move away from the perforations, the vacuum pressure through the mesh is automatically reduced and then cut so that the gloves are no longer held tightly to the mesh surface of the flaps. Keeping the vacuum supply separate from the flaps is therefore a particularly helpful aspect of the invention and provides several important benefits. First, the weight of each flap **171**, **173** is minimized and the construction is simplified as there is no need to provide additional air flow channels to or within the body of the movable flap. Second, because the weight of each flap is minimized, it is easier to move the flap rapidly in either direction, thereby speeding up the packing process and further simplifying the construction of the apparatus. Thirdly, the vacuum airflow is automatically released when the flap **171**, **173** moves away from the perforations **91**, which avoids the need to switch the vacuum flow on and off or even to provide a positive air flow to the flaps to help dislodge the gloves from the flaps when these have moved fully over the recess. This is a real advantage when gloves are being stacked at a rate of about one glove per second. It is therefore preferred that vacuum pressure applied to the perforation is continuous and constant.

FIG. **16** shows the stacking station **160** after the glove manipulator **138** has been withdrawn, with a cuff **110** of the deposited glove **106** extending beyond the packing recess and over a first movable flap **171** on one side **178** of the packing recess **175**.

FIG. **17** shows how, after the deposit of a second glove **106'** oriented oppositely with respect to the first glove **106**, but with thumbs **116**, **116'** on the same side of the packing recess **175**, the first movable flap **171** is rotated **93** about a pivot rod **94** to fold the cuff **110** of the first glove over the finger portion **114'**, **116'** of the second glove **106'**. The other flap **173** is mounted on a similar rod **94'** and moves in the same way to fold over the cuff **110'** of the second glove after a third glove (not shown) has been deposited on the stack in the same orientation as the first glove **106**. In this way, an interfolded stack of gloves is built up, with the stack being repeatedly compressed by the piston **86** after the deposit of each glove.

FIGS. **18** and **19** show how the various embodiments of the apparatus **1**, **101** for stacking gloves described above may be

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paired into two side-by side production lines and how two of the glove placement means 30, 130 may be mounted on a frame 95 from above. This arrangement is particularly efficient, because a worker at the starting end 19 of the first conveyor 2, 102 may use both hands at the same time to place a glove on each of the first conveyors.

The invention therefore provides a convenient apparatus and method for stacking gloves prior to packing in a dispensing box.

Modifications and substitutions by one of ordinary skill in the art are considered to be within the scope of the present invention, which is not to be limited except by the allowed claims and their legal equivalents.

The invention claimed is:

1. A glove stacking apparatus for forming a stack of gloves, comprising:

a packing recess for receiving said gloves to be stacked; at least one movable flap disposed adjacent said recess and configured for folding towards the recess a portion of a glove overlapping an edge of the recess, the movable flap having a surface that is permeable to gaseous flow through said surface; and

the glove stacking apparatus further including a source of steady vacuum pressure and means to apply said steady vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of the movable flap in order to pull said overlapping portion of said glove to the movable flap prior to folding of said overlapping portion, wherein the source of steady vacuum pressure is separate from the movable flap such that as the movable flap folds towards the recess, the application of said vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said movable flap is automatically released based upon an amount of separation between the movable flap and the means to apply said steady vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of the movable flap.

2. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 1, in which said means to apply said vacuum pressure comprises at least one perforation in a work surface disposed beneath the permeable surface of the movable flap.

3. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 1, in which said permeable surface of said movable flap is a mesh, said mesh being permeable to said gaseous flow.

4. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 1, in which the recess has side walls for aligning gloves stacked one on another inside the recess and a movable floor which can be lowered as said stack of gloves grows so the topmost glove in the stack of gloves is substantially level with a top edge of the recess.

5. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 1, in which said at least one movable flap is adjacent an edge of said recess for folding towards the recess a portion of a glove overlapping said edge of the recess.

6. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 5, in which said movable flap is hinged adjacent said edge.

7. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed in claim 1, in which:

the recess is substantially square or rectangular; and there is a pair of said movable flaps on opposite side edges of the recess for folding alternately inwards to the recess portions of gloves overlapping alternately one or another of said opposite side edges.

8. A glove stacking apparatus as claimed claim 1, in which the, or each, movable flap is arranged to fold towards the recess such that, in use, the movable flap contacts the stack of gloves formed in the recess in order to help compress the stack of gloves.

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9. A method of stacking gloves using a glove stacking apparatus, said apparatus comprising a glove placement means, a source of vacuum pressure, a packing recess for receiving said gloves to be stacked, and adjacent said recess at least one movable flap, the movable flap having a surface that is permeable to gaseous flow through said surface, the method comprising the steps of:

using the glove placement means to deposit a glove at said recess such that a portion of the glove is contained by said recess and another portion of said glove overlaps an edge of said recess and lies on said at least one movable flap;

applying the source of vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said flap to pull said portion of the deposited glove overlapping the edge of the recess onto said flap;

moving said at least one movable flap to fold towards the recess said portion of said glove overlapping said edge of the recess so that said glove is contained by said recess;

repeating the preceding steps to form a stack of gloves within the bounds of said recess

wherein the process of moving said flap to fold said portion of said glove causes said permeable surface to move away from the source of vacuum pressure so that said portion of the deposited glove overlapping the edge of the recess is no longer pulled onto said flap.

10. A method as claimed in claim 9, in which the recess has a movable floor, the method comprising the steps of:

i) moving the movable floor proximate the level of a top edge of the recess;

ii) placing a first glove to be stacked over the recess, with a cuff portion of said glove overlapping an edge of the recess;

iii) placing a second glove to be stacked over the recess, with a second cuff portion of said glove overlapping an edge of the recess;

iv) lowering the recess floor as required to keep the top of the stack of gloves in the recess substantially level with the work surface;

v) using at least one movable flap to fold over said first cuff portion inwards towards the recess, so that the first cuff portion is folded over a finger portion of the second glove contained within the recess; and

vi) repeating steps ii) to v) to build up a stack of interfolded gloves within the recess.

11. A method as claimed in claim 9, said apparatus comprising additionally a glove placement means including an attractive lifting surface, the method comprising the steps of: holding a glove to the glove placement means using the attractive lifting surface;

using the glove placement means to move said held glove into position for depositing at said recess; and

using the source of vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said flap to help pull said lifted glove off the attractive lifting surface so that the glove is deposited at said recess.

12. A method as claimed in claim 11, said apparatus comprising additionally a glove placement means including a lifting means with an attractive glove lifting surface, the method comprising the steps of:

holding a glove to the glove placement means using the attractive lifting surface;

using the glove placement means to move said held glove into position for depositing at said recess; and

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using the source of vacuum pressure through said permeable surface of said flap to help pull said lifted glove off the attractive lifting surface so that the glove is deposited at said recess.

13. A method as claimed in claim 9, in which the method 5 further comprises using said source of vacuum pressure to provide a steady vacuum pressure, whereby the application of said vacuum pressure through said permeable surface depends on the amount of separation between the moveable flap and the means to apply said vacuum pressure through 10 said permeable surface of the movable flap.

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